

Homogenizing Social Media – Affect/Effect and Globalization of Media and the Public Sphere

Introduction

In this chapter we examine how the globalization of media has had a number of effects beyond ‘global’ and ‘local’ considerations. We are concerned here with the influence of new media and social media constructs on the public sphere and civil society. In the 1990s globalisation theorists critiqued macro-changes brought about by the global capitalist system by introducing the effects of the ‘local’ thus ‘glocalization’ was used as a term of analysis in which local and global phenomena informed each other in various ways. The homogenising effect of social media platforms/software is both capital as well as social: privileging a particular version of ‘the person’ ensures diversity does not intrude on the type, format, and affect/effect of social media.

In terms of social media expression and the public sphere, this homogenizing process ensures that various public spheres, interacting with each other, thus continuing the local-global dynamic, will continue to privilege a particular kind of person. This homogenized person, interacting as a ‘sous-veillance’ ‘prosumer’ pushes this homogenization of public spheres around the world. On the surface this appears as the ultimate form of localized media creation. We contend that the ‘sameness’ produced by this process can deliver interesting affects/effects on the nation-state and media interaction. As a result we may not have a great difference between public spheres of nation-states that we might presume to exist. Media globalization seems to have entered a process whereby nation-states and their citizens are entering a stage of homogenization of the actual tools of social media. Simply put, if everyone uses Facebook, does this create sameness or open the door to difference and variety?

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We find these logics of sameness demonstrated in relation to the various ways in which social media ‘flattens’, often by its very architecture, particular ‘styles’ of selfhood. We examine this flattening in relation to a number disparate, but related phenomena: we consider the ways in which Facebook operates as a form of lateral surveillance panopticon, and one in which middle-class professional norms govern the ‘correct’ use of the site; we consider the convergence of political support and political subjects in the reporting and supporting of the anti-Ahmadinejad protestors in the wake of Iran’s 2009 election; and finally we consider the ways in which the use of intelligence, itself (mis)used for political endeavours, is itself being ‘flattened’ through the use of ‘spookipedia’, or social network site-inspired (and often automated) processes of identification and intelligence gathering. Rather than tending toward radical individualism we argue that the flattening effects of these technologies, themselves encroaching further and further into the everyday of citizens around the world, encourage a homogenization of affect, if not effects.

The Facebook Self

New media has changed a previously well-known media landscape. The new communication technologies affect the relationship between the actors of political communication. While in the past there was a hierarchy between the different actors, where the political system, media system, citizens/voters order could be set up, today’s political system opening towards the citizens and the new networking techniques of civilians has brought the two actors to almost the same level as that of the media and flattened this previous hierarchy of media production.

The starting point for this section is that political communication can be connected with the emergence of mass democracy and mass communication, and here we further assert that new communication technologies lead to the democratization of the practice of political communication [Howard & Parks 2012; Papacharissi 2014]. These changes have taken place without any revolutionary change in the hallmarks of societies that forced the political system to give up its original role. Under ideal conditions, if we assume high and predictable economic and cultural development, for the change of political communication it is not necessary to change the socio-political arrangements, it is enough if the technologies are changing, which are specifically affecting the daily lives of people [Croteau et al. 2011]. It should be noted that the

previous claim is only theoretical, and it is true only under ideal conditions. The practice is somewhat inconsistent with the theory, often accompanied by changes in socio-political factors, as well [Merkovity et al. 2014].

The social network site (SNS) Facebook has come to occupy a central place in the everyday socialising of hundreds of millions of users around the world. It allows its users to connect with a variety of people drawn from both their professional and personal milieus, and places them all upon the same social plane as a social network connection or 'Friend'. While Facebook's design is often updated or changed, including the ability to demarcate audiences since 2011, one of the primary affects upon users is a 'flattening' of social audiences and contexts [Boyd 2011]. This 'flattening' also compresses time so that all Facebook users' posts to the site are collated into a single 'Timeline' such that, although marked by a chronological date of reference, they are able to be viewed at once in toto. Facebook's design can be considered to be a form of virtual architecture inside which contemporary selves are housed and socialise with others. Architecture and spatial design regulate and guide particular behaviours and in so doing engender particular power effects. Facebook's architecture is a mutual surveillance architecture, and itself entwined with a broader ensemble of discursive formations. These all contribute to privileging and shaping particular forms of selfhood—the neoliberal self.

While Facebook's role as a facilitator of social networks and self-expression can be seen as a conduit through which individuals connect with the world around them, it also acts as a means through which they might gain insight into their own self. Facebook has been described as an 'architecture of disclosure' [Marichal 2012] and users often feel compelled to maintain visibility within it. As a result the individual's relationship with self and others is augmented. It is here that subjectivity-building and social relationships are entwined with myriad power relations engendered by both augmented relationships and the digital surveillance enclosure of Facebook. It is in these ways that relationships of power, knowledge, and subjectivity are connected.

Both the design of Facebook and the 'space' of networked publics operate as structures that Facebook users must house their online personas within. From the very outset Facebook users find their behavioural choices limited. The options available to the Facebook user during the signup process provide a structure within which to fill out their personal details. The design choices present within the template constrain the available options to the Facebook user. These limitations can be seen as reinforcing

already existing norms such as gender and race [Van House 2011] which have power effects upon the Facebook users' construction of the self. In this sense the design itself facilitates processes of categorisation and normalisation to which the user is subjected. Here then the very structural design of the Facebook Profile interface reinforces existing power relations and norms. From the very outset of their experience with the site Facebook users are subjected to the operation of power. The very act of constructing a Facebook Profile entails a purposive set of acts that constitute 'writing oneself into being' [Sundén 2003]. From the outset the choices available to the Facebook user both enable and constrain the semi-permanent display of self that exists as the Profile page. The elements that allow users to provide information about themselves within pre-given categories tend to reiterate existing identity norms whilst masking the contingency of these categories.

Facebook becomes a space to produce the self performatively through an ongoing everyday engagement with the site. Various aspects of the self can be performatively reiterated by highlighting a commitment to one's particular obligations or by simply rendering oneself visible within the governable terrain of the site. While performing these roles users often demonstrate restraint so that their posts conform to a spectrum of acceptable claims and behaviours related to the particular subjectivity they are occupying and portraying. Performances are shaped by a number of formal and informal regulations such as the 'truths' embedded within the multiple discourses that contribute to the performative constructions of the self. For example, in performing the subjectivity of being a student and all that this entails, whether it is the self-disciplined and diligent scholar submitting assignments on time at the expense of all social commitments or the slacker whose social commitments intrude upon their studies, subjectivity is performed with an eye to 'the rules of the game' of being a student. In these ways numerous power relations are manifested whenever users draw upon one or other discursive materials as part of their presentation of the self. Indeed the very act of performing the self, of being a performatively constructed subject, is an exercise of power in Foucault's sense of any given exercise of power is a productive act [Foucault 1984].

Facebook is a cultural artefact imbued with relationships of power and facilitates the reproduction of political order. Its architectural design, the discourses that shape user behaviours, and the ways in which it augments relationships all contribute to the production of well-regulated selfhood and political order. The 'norms', etiquettes, and

discourses related to Facebook practices all contribute to the reproduction of political order. Cultural artefacts and practices are hence identified as sites through which political order is reproduced and the operation of power is facilitated. Facebook extends the reach of neoliberal rationalities and operates as a space in which its users are able to both present and meditate upon their actions as moral subjects. As a technology of the self, Facebook allows its users to write themselves into being through largely informal practices of self-writing and to later reflect on these writings in the form of the Facebook Timeline. The morality of the neoliberal subject is ultimately linked to the political and economic spheres of production and consumption [Bauman 2005]. Entrepreneurial self-government is largely about producing good, employable citizen-consumers and thus extending the governmental reach into the sphere of the everyday while punishing (or threatening to, via the risk presented in ‘life after social networking discourses’) behaviour that is outside an ever-decreasing range of acceptable ‘normal’ behaviours. The corollary of this is that these processes are interlinked with ethics. Hence people behaving outside of these acceptable ranges of behaviour are cast as immoral. As Peter Kelly notes:

as workers in liberal democracies we are free to choose and act, but to be employable or successful in the world of flexible capitalism we have to choose and act in certain ways—or suffer the consequences [Kelly 2013: 11].

The stakes here, then, are those of freedom. The reproduction of neoliberal values ultimately relies upon the paradox of producing unfreedom within freedom. It is about producing a regulated range of acceptable behaviours by encouraging free individuals to adhere to an ever-decreasing range of acceptable behaviours, and to cast those outside of these acceptable behaviours as unethical and immoral. That those who fail to conform with the acceptable behaviours are often linked to lower social classes or those outside the spaces of success within neoliberal capitalism reinforces the notion of the ‘deserving poor’. Those that are struggling to keep afloat within the precarious seas of neoliberal capitalism are somehow cast as deserving of their fates due to their supposedly inherent immorality [Sayer 2005].

It has been argued by Zygmunt Bauman [2005; 2007] that the present era is marked by a shift from individuals as primarily ‘producers’ to a mode of existence that is

primarily that of 'consumers'. He terms this 'consumerism' and traces the shifts from industrial capitalism through the dismantling of the welfare state, along with the flight of capital to developing countries (in which poorly paid workers perform the work that was previously performed in the West) and contends that a concomitant shift occurred from the 'work ethic' to the 'consumer ethic'. Bauman contends that in each case, the work ethic and the consumer ethic, political order is ensured as it is reproduced by those interpellating the ethic, performing the work, and consuming the goods. Facebook becomes a means through which this ethic is extended into the everyday, where individuals are themselves commodified, and where spectacular consumption is displayed through the Facebook Profile. Truly, this is the protestant work ethic 2.0.

Twitter and Strange Alliances

In the wake of the disputed 2009 election protests erupted in Iran which were broadcast around the world by mainstream media as well as via the emerging SNS Twitter. Technologically-savvy Iranian protestors themselves were circumventing state media restrictions and disseminating information and images of state violence which were then being retweeted and spread via Twitter users in the West. Many Westerners were breathlessly calling the protests the 'Twitter Revolution' because of the role Twitter was playing in helping Iranian protestors disseminate their information, which was then further broadcast by a sympathetic Western audience. The 2009 elections in Iran saw massive waves of protest as pro-democracy demonstrators, supporters of the opposition leader Mir Hussein Mousavi, took to the streets in protest of the disputed outcome of the election. The events unfolding in Iran were soon being breathlessly repeated across the globe through the magnifying power of new media.

The Twitter phenomenon was simultaneously being celebrated for its use in the spreading of information regarding the protests in Iran, and the reasons were twofold. Firstly, it was used by many thousands of people outside of Iran to spread messages of support for the pro-democracy protestors in Iran, by sending information about the events taking place in Iran and by changing their avatars, or profile icons, to the colour green to display their support for the pro-democracy protestors. Secondly, protestors in Iran were using Twitter to circumvent the dramatic shutdown of all

forms of media in Iran by the Iranian government. Technologically-savvy Iranian protestors used proxy IP addresses to sidestep the Iranian government's blocking of Twitter. They were also able to send messages and images of violence used by the Iranian government to the world outside of Iran. Further, protestors were using Twitter, as well as SMS before the cellular networks for closed down, to organise protests inside of Iran. Hack (an Australian radio program that is known for its 'critical-popular' stance on issues) covered the protests in Iran. A primary source of news for many of its listeners, the program framed the events less as being about protests directed toward the Ahmadinejad regime and more as an example of a 'cyberwar'. Presenter Kate O'Toole introduced the story thus: "It's possibly the biggest cyberwar ever waged, with protestors in Iran dodging firewalls to post photos and videos despite the government's attempts to ban the media and shut down social networking sites" [Hack Radio 2009]. Later in the same piece activist Geordie Guy from Electronic Frontiers (www.efa.org.au) described the events in Iran as "one of the biggest cyberwars we've ever seen". The use of the language 'cyberwar' reflects the interpretation of the demonstrations by Western audiences as an event that pertains to technology rather than electoral politics.

This does not yet mean that it is an effective and viable challenge to the prevailing socio-political order, or the state apparatus itself. While the political demands of many of the participants are clear enough in and of themselves, there is neither agreement among the participants, nor a set of developed alternatives to what can be considered a political power structure determining the trajectories of people's lives in Iran. Winning the 'cyber-war' does not necessarily mean winning the political contest, nor does it mean that the prevailing power structure is challenged to a level that will push for political change on the ground. It may present such a possibility, but it cannot be assumed as a *fait accompli*.

Media reports in the West were rapid and plentiful in celebrating the revolutionary potential of Twitter and its use by Iranians. The Washington Times [23rd June 2009] editorialised the 'Twitter revolution' taking place then in Iran, championing the 'flickering flame of freedom' that they claimed was beginning to appear in Iran. It reported that the Iranian government shut down all forms of communication, other than the Internet, leaving Twitter as the only viable medium with which to pass information. Schectman [2009] urged caution in making grand claims as to the extent of the role of Twitter in Iranian protests, suggesting that word of mouth and SMS

were the most useful forms of communication. Schectman raises the position of social media expert Gaurav Mishra [cited in Schectman 2009] who argued that ‘one of Twitter’s primary contributions in the Iranian elections has been to raise awareness of the issue among tech-savvy users outside of the country’.

Certainly, Twitter was extraordinarily successful in conveying information both in and from Iran to the West. The Sydney Morning Herald [17th June 2009] reported that the US government asked Twitter to postpone its planned maintenance so as to ‘allow Iranians to communicate while their government has banned other media following elections’. One of the ways in which Western Twitter users were involved was in helping to aid Iranians sidestep governmental attempts to block Twitter. Doctorow [2009], in a post on boingboing.net, advised would-be activists on how to conduct themselves on Twitter so as to best aid Iranian protestors: “Security forces are monitoring this hashtag, and the moment they identify a proxy IP they will block it in Iran”. Further instructions implore people to use only the ‘#iranelection and #gr88’ hashtags to spread information on Twitter, as well as advising individuals to change their Twitter time-zone settings to GMT +3.30 in order to overwhelm Iranian security services with the number of Twitter messages appearing to emanate from Tehran. Doctorow [2009] implored people to ‘spread the (legitimate) word’, and suggested that the example of the ‘#nomaintenance’ hashtag campaign succeeded in convincing Twitter to postpone scheduled maintenance so as to keep the flow of information from Iran operating.

Clay Shirky [TED.com 2009] argued at the time that Twitter was the most important technology being used in regards the flow of information about Iran. He suggested that the ‘real-time’ nature of Twitter messaging aided in its ability to elicit an emotional investment from those who use it, and that this gave an added salience to the ways in which people were connecting around the issue of Iran.

Kate Crawford [2009] is particularly interested in this emotional aspect of Twitter use, and considered the phenomenon of individuals using Twitter who changed their avatars to a green colour in support of protestors in Iran. She argues Twitter’s success has been effective in its ability to ‘[get] people to notice and feel invested in an event’ [Crawford 2009]. Huppke [2009] addressed the phenomenon of Twitter becoming ‘a gathering place to discuss Middle Eastern politics’, and the irony of this development on a site on which Huppke claims ‘the primary subjects of conversation often revolve around “American Idol” finales, iPhones, and anything involving a Kardishan, Hilton

or Lohan”. Huppke [2009] admits to feeling skeptical when first exposed to the enthusiasm with which ‘Twitter activists’ were espousing support for the protestors in Iran, later finding that there was a positive in Twitter’s ability to expose previously ignorant individuals to information likely to make them more politically aware. Nonetheless, the former technology writer, Stilgherrian was scathing in his assessment of the reasons people changed their Twitter avatars to green, and suggested that there are more elements, such as class, at play that makes the situation more complex and nuanced than the ‘technology equals freedom’ equation [Stilgherrian 2009].

Stilgherrian’s assessment leads to an interesting conclusion – yes, there are larger forces at play. He astutely observes the unlikely allegiance between progressive, ‘right-on’ technologically savvy types and the US neocons, all calling for that same regime change in Iran to ostensibly further the aims of an aggrieved portion of the population whose desired democratic outcomes were not met. This points to a dilemma of both authenticity as well as the structural underpinnings of the access to that ‘liberatory’ technology [Owen & Imre 2013]. The technology itself raises a number of issues that need further examination: does access to the deeper levels of communications among individuals provide a form of structural liberation, does this access merely allow more people to talk to more people, does the technology facilitate democratic practice? All of these problematics need greater analysis in order for us to understand the dynamics of new forms of social practice using the near-ubiquitous communicative tools and simply assuming that having people communicate digitally is not enough in itself. It is a similar development to that observed by Hirschkind and Mahmood [2002: 339–340], that of the unlikely alliance between some Western feminist groups and supporters of aggressive military action in Afghanistan. The trend that is engendering these unlikely allegiances, as well as the mobilisation of subjects in Iran and Ukraine willing to adopt a ‘pro-democracy’ subject position, can be explained by considering these events as materialisation of the same thing – global governmentality.

This global governmentality can be viewed in a number of ways, and does not necessarily guarantee the allegiance of the protesters with each other, but certainly seems to have the potential to re-form social movements, whether viewing themselves as pro-democracy or not [Imre 2013]. Furthermore, we conclude here in this chapter, that suggestions of greater development of technologies, and greater usage of those

technologies in varying degrees, must also include the possibilities of new forms of democracies and democratic practices. While this is not discussed specifically in this chapter, we certainly point out the possibility. In this sense the present is marked by the spread of neoliberal capitalism and its concomitant subjectivities, all of which are being supported more than any sort of calls for ‘democracy’—In the case of Iran it was the outcome of a democratic election that was being directly challenged by demonstrators in Iran and their supporters outside of the country. We argue that this is a manifestation of a set of ideological values that extends the reach of the global governmentality empire of desiring neoliberal subjects. At present, far from being the catalyst for any sort of ‘revolution’, Twitter’s role is one that further entrenches the values of empire.

Intelligence 2.0

A more hidden example of this flattening affect is glimpsed in the world of intelligence. Intelligence is of obvious importance in relation to its role in providing information and analysis that can often have vast geopolitical ramifications. While the intelligence world is by necessity largely clandestine, reports into the world of intelligence reveal that it is as muddled as it is murky, and often subject to ‘top-down’ agendas in which the political will of whatever government of the day is known throughout agencies, themselves increasingly subject to the neoliberal logics of flexibility and contractualism, and encouraged to provide analysis that fits within the policy frameworks of their political masters. These affects are further augmented by rationalised systems broadly dubbed ‘spookipedia’ [Werbin 2011] in which social media site-inspired platforms are rolled-out to intelligence agencies. These technologies, and the ‘flattening’ processes of automated sorting, contribute to furthering the reach of neoliberal (and by extent biopolitical) logics.

Intelligence organisations are comprised of a great many people, often with jockeying goals, agendas, and often rivalries. Organisations do not function on the ability of individuals to all go in one direction at the same time. Internal dynamics of competition lead to layers of complexity and a ‘muddling’ of processes. So there will be competition internally, there will be competition among various agencies seeking to do similar work, and there will be straightforward competition among individuals, whether they are in the same workplaces or not, to hinder their co-workers, or gather

the requisite information first, or quicker, or at less cost and so on. Various competitive possibilities will also produce a number of different kinds of data and information that will make the situation unclear. The human element of intelligence as a profession will always make it a murky and muddled practice.

Automation and robotisation is already seen as a way in which defence and intelligence might supersede the limitations of human analysis and decision making [Singer 2009]. As robots are increasingly mobilised on the battlefield they are still tethered to humans at their control, but this is not a certainty into the future. The time taken for a human to conduct the decision making process is seen by some in the world of defence as a weak point—the ‘human in the loop’ that is often the only aspect of robotic weaponry that justifies the ethics of sending robots to kill humans—and there are calls to allow robots to perform the decision making themselves, thus speeding up response times in heated situations considerably.

A similar logic is at play within intelligence. Panoptic sorting systems [Gandy 1993] already gather large amounts of data from various sources which are then used to categorise individuals into groups, generally as found in the world of banking as ‘risk’ or ‘non-risk’ individuals. This is increasingly finding a home in the worlds of intelligence and security surveillance, which itself feeds-back into the citizenry by articulating desirable ‘safe’ identities to be internalised and performatively maintained [Barnard-Wills 2012]. Similarly, the models of intelligence software being used in intelligence services are able to categorise large swathes of the population and sort them into particular categories of ‘risk’. What is also emerging is the ways in which these databases are themselves modelled on SNSs such as Facebook, allowing further (human) analysis as intelligence employees peruse ‘risky’ profiles in much the same fashion as a Facebook user might peruse profiles of old schoolmates. Werbin analyses three of these technologies:

A-Space (a Facebook-like social networking platform for intelligence analysts), *TAG/Connect* (an intelligence social bookmarking platform for tagging information), and *Intellipedia* (a wiki-style intelligence platform) – [which] reveals not only a significant shift to bottom-up participation and decision-making for the intelligence community that is reflective of participatory culture writ large, but also how this intelligence ‘reinvention’ furthers a biopolitical milieu that sorts populations of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ as a

basis for securing the endless and indefinite circulation of people and things. Given the power of security and law enforcement to take people out of circulation and potentially ruin their lives should an error occur (i.e. inaccurately tagging an individual as a ‘terrorist’), what are the dangers of entrusting more of this power to bottom-up systems that are, by definition, outside of direct top-down human oversight and supervision? [These result in] bottom-up procedures (specifically data mining and social tagging) [which] necessarily produce inaccuracies and errors [Werbin 2011: 1254–1255].

Werbin’s analysis highlights the ways in which these practices are biopolitical by sorting the bodies of populations, linked here through their digital identities or ‘digital doubles’ [Whitson & Haggerty 2008], with predictable sets of outcomes that might befall ‘marked’ persons should they come into contact with law enforcement organisations. Much as the ‘tainted’ identity displayed on Facebook jeopardises the individual’s employment prospects [Albrechtslund 2008], the marked ‘suspect’ identity produced by a suite of ‘spookipedia’ [Werbin 2011] technologies poses often unknowable risks to many individuals. As Barnard-Wills [2012] highlights, the only option for people is to behave themselves in such a fashion that they do not arise categorical suspicion lest they fall into the surveillance net.

Conclusion

The Facebook, Twitter, and intelligence-gathering components of this complex array of social media and new communication technologies might be providing us with significantly new formations to work with. Fraught with danger, and based on assumptions of democratization, we are left with a hegemonic move that seeks to contain communications in a more-than-controlled and surveilled manner. This means there is a privileging of particular types of monitoring, focusing on specific kinds of human personality traits, encouraging very particular behaviours, and developing an overarching system of social media interaction that is at once global and local. Individuals in their localities must necessarily catalogue the mundane aspects of their everyday lives, yet the use of the exact same software, websites, and devices designed by the same companies have developed a specific kind of hegemony and hegemonic

practice. Perhaps the next step in examining problems to do with these social media technologies is to examine more closely the biopolitical and thanatopolitical ramifications of what could possibly be a new and more dangerous stage of these developments. We leave this open for others to pursue in the near future.

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ABSTRACT (up to 500 words)

Social media and the public sphere has developed a specific new formation of communication and politics. In this chapter we examine some of the ramifications of this and argue that the design and application of social media presents a specific kind of cultural homogeneity that users must perform. Local and global interactions may not be creating a diversity of any kind, and is instead creating opportunities for simplification of surveillance as well as a pattern of privileging particular kinds of personality traits among users. Design itself is not democratized, and as such the affect and effect that we examine here is delivering a dangerous lack of diversity in the global social media construct.

Keywords: social media, globalization, public sphere, civil society, cultural homogenization.

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Dr Imre has an interdisciplinary background in a number of academic fields.

Connecting his research is a concern with the manner in which people interact with their governments. This includes studies and research in to diverse areas such as terrorist movements, comparative education systems, the use of social media by governments both in election campaigns and in policy controversies. He also has a focus on contemporary regime change and the ways in which governments decline and shift, and the ways in which active protests facilitate that change. Dr Imre completed his Bachelor's (Honours) Political Studies at Queen's University in Canada, a Master's in Political Science at the University of Victoria, in Canada, and his PhD at the University of Queensland.

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Dr Merkovity received his PhD degree in 2011 at University of Szeged, Hungary. At present, he is assistant research fellow at University of Szeged and research fellow at National University of Public Service (Budapest, Hungary). Merkovity recently authored a book examining the political communication in the era of new technologies, titled Introduction to the Theory of Old and New Political Communication (ISBN: 978-963-9650-99-2). He won the Magyary Zoltan Postdoctoral Fellowship and a support from Hungarian Scientific Research Fund for his research on politicians' use of social networking sites.

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Stephen has recently had his PhD thesis accepted and will be awarded his doctorate late in 2014 at the University of Newcastle, Australia. His thesis analysed Facebook use from a Foucauldian perspective. Stephen's research interests are broadly concerned with the intersections of cultural phenomena (particularly digital culture) with the operation of power and the political construction of the self.